

## A Question of Acculturation: What is “Czech Music” in America?

Judith Mabary, Marywood University, Scranton, Pennsylvania

“I am one of the vanquished. As a Czech, as an exile, as a European, as an intellectual, as a philosopher, and as an Italian citizen...this is how I see the role of the vanquished intellectual: we must not let ourselves be corralled into histories written by the victors.”<sup>1</sup> This quote comes from Czech philosopher Václav Bělohradský, a professor at the University of Trieste, during an interview in the 1980s with Czech journalist Karel Hvizďala. Several years later Hvizďala asked former president Václav Havel if he could agree with this interpretation. In the 1990 book-length interview, *Disturbing the Peace*, Havel responds that if Bělohradský sees the most intrinsic role of the intellectual as not allowing himself to be "corralled" into histories written by the victors, then he fully agrees. He elaborates on this statement by saying that the intellectual “...should be the chief doubter of systems...” and “...at odds with hard and fast categories...”<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, professors and teachers in the field of music have been "corralled" by tradition to introduce classical music predominantly in terms of the contributions of the cultural victors (primarily Germany and Austria with less attention paid to Italy and France and only a quick glance at the efforts of English and American composers). In today's academic arena, however, where attempts to be more inclusive are foremost, there is much concern at all levels (in elementary, secondary, and college courses) that students also be introduced to the music of the world.

But what constitutes world music? Revered ethnomusicologist Bruno Nettl, in his introduction to *Excursions in World Music*, which is often used as a textbook for beginning level undergraduate classes, defines it straightforwardly as the music of the world's cultures. The approach of this collection of essays, with each chapter devoted to a specific geographic region, is to emphasize the unique qualities of individual peoples while focusing on a musical event that is considered, in broadest terms, as representative. Yet this approach results, by Nettl's own admission, in a limited view of the world.<sup>3</sup>

Jeff Titon in his introductory textbook *Worlds of Music* explains the expanding interest in various world cultures as the result of an increased ethnic awareness in a climate that is changing with great rapidity. Like Nettl, he speaks of music as culture and as reflective of a people's way of life that has been learned and transmitted over the course of several centuries of adapting to one's environment.<sup>4</sup>

Inherent in both definitions is the sense that there is a specific musical expression distinctive to each culture that should be acknowledged and studied. Referring again to the writing of Bruno Nettl, and his 1983 volume *The Study of Ethnomusicology*, we find that his analysis of the method of the ethnomusicologist concludes that, until recently, scholars have tended to ignore music that was not deemed authentic and original. “Polluted styles” that derived from several sources in their development were regarded as unstable, and for the most part, were dismissed in favor of tiny remnants of traditions that [scholars] could assume had remained unchanged over time.<sup>5</sup>

In the comparatively recent past, a more common-sense approach has gained acceptance, which holds that the pursuit of an authentic music is similar to Don Quixote as he jousts with windmills – the object of the confrontation is itself an illusion. To more accurately describe musics of the world, scholars and educators have found the term *acculturation* to be quite useful. Webster provides a concise and valuable definition of the term: “1. the process of adopting the cultural traits or social patterns of another group, esp. a dominant one; [or] 2. the restructuring or blending of cultures resulting from this [process].”<sup>6</sup>

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We might be inclined at first to point to the United States as one of the most obvious places to find examples of acculturation, since ours is a country of continuing immigration. But in fact, acculturation occurs wherever differing cultures come together. When Jesuit missionaries arrived in Mexico and encountered the indigenous Yaqui, they left behind a legacy not only of Western religious customs that is still evident in Yaqui practices today, but also the harp and guitar. When nineteenth-century composers in the classical tradition discovered the exoticism of the Orient and one of its trademarks, the pentatonic (or 5-note) scale, they were quick to incorporate aspects of this culture in their Western compositions.

So the point is made: when and wherever cultures come into contact, they share parts of their unique identities. What does this mean for Czech music? How has Czech music manifested itself in the United States? Has it also been made the object of acculturation? Would a citizen who has lived all his life in a small village in the Czech Republic recognize as authentic the so-called traditional songs that are sung and the polka rhythms that are danced to at the Sokol Hall in Berwyn, Illinois? Theoretically, we could expect to find significant differences between the music of the two towns, a direct result of the distinctive environments in which the traditions were cultivated.

This brings us to another dilemma. If there are different types or variations of Czech music that acquire some of their differences by developing in diverse surroundings, can we even talk about Czech music in generic terms? Let us pursue this point. If we asked people on the street in Cedar Rapids, Iowa (or anywhere in the United States) to name three pieces of Czech music, assuming they could name any at all, how would they respond? Their two most likely choices might be Dvořák's *New World Symphony* and Smetana's *Moldau*. Yet the very name by which the majority refers to Smetana's work is a byproduct of acculturation. "Moldau" is the German name for the river that flows through Prague, which the Czechs know as the Vltava. But since Germany provided the dominant cultural and linguistic influences in the Czech Lands for many years, it is not surprising that Smetana's work is more widely recognized by its German name.

But what about a third Czech work? Most ordinary laypeople would be at a loss to name one. If you asked, "What about folk music, the polka for instance?", they may snicker, depending on their age, or say "but isn't that from Poland?" the rationale being "Pol" and – "pol"ka. Others might believe that it originated in Germany, probably due to its great popularity there.

Conflicting views about the origins of the polka are, in fact, abundant even in intellectual circles. We can conclude, therefore, that this genre is probably not the place to look for our authentic Czech music, even though it has gained a certain amount of authenticity as a Czech-American form of folk music (but so too as an authentic Polish dance). According to the article on the polka in the latest version of the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, the earliest dictionary entry for the word (in Josef Jungmann's *Czech-German Dictionary* from 1837) defines the dance as Polish.<sup>7</sup> This article makes clear that uncertainty about the origin of the polka persisted in other sources as well. The most popular legend supporting a Czech origin states that the dance was invented by a peasant girl from Bohemia named Anna Chadimová-Slezak in the 1830s. Yet an early mention of the dance (in the *Časopis Českého musea* from 1835) refers to it as a variation of the *krakowiak* as it was danced in Hradec Králové and where it was referred to as the *polka*.<sup>8</sup> Other sources propose that the dance was much older. One 1863 publication by Thomas Hillgrove, published in New York, even makes the unsubstantiated claim that the beginnings of the polka are found in an ancient Scythian dance.<sup>9</sup> Whatever its origins, there can be no disputing the popularity of the polka in the Czech

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Lands and among those of Czech descent in the U.S. The authors of the *New Grove* article leave us with a conclusion that is easily supported by the repertoire, that “of all the Czech dances, the polka is the one that most commonly denotes notions of Czechness, and as such has been incorporated by Czech composers into their works.”<sup>10</sup>

But what of our other examples? First, let’s examine the music of Dvořák. Scholars agree that much of his music relies heavily on the Germanic style, yet the composer frequently introduces a type of melody and harmonic inflections that remind us of a simple folk tradition, leading us to the conclusion that, considering the composer, it must be Czech. Yet if we recall the elements that give the *New World Symphony* much of its unique sound and appeal, we may have visions of Native America instead. How then are we to classify this work? Is it Czech or something else? What about the music of Dvořák in general? Is it Czech music, German music, the “polluted” type of music reported by Nettl? Or is it simply the music of a certain era, responding to a specific set of influences, originating from a primarily Czech environment, but heavily under the sway of German/Austrian, and later American, traditions that happened to be written by a composer from the Czech Lands who was, of course, susceptible to these influences? We are perhaps beginning to sense that our search for authenticity should be redefined to encompass not the most original but the most genuine forms of expression.

And where does this leave Smetana’s *Vltava*? What, other than the programmatic association with the famous river that Smetana made symbolic of the nation, makes this work Czech? Is it the lyrical melody? We could argue that other traditions have similar lyrical melodies. Is it the musical references, combined with Smetana’s textual clues, which present the image of the river as it winds through significant places in the Czech countryside? If we didn’t know it was the Vltava and we didn’t have Smetana’s hints, could it just as easily be the Danube?

To further emphasize how difficult it can be to correctly identify the origin of a musical work, listen to these two examples. (The author now plays a section from Dvořák’s Symphony No. 2 followed by an excerpt from the third movement of Brahms’s Symphony No. 2). The first is by a Czech composer, although it has a certain Germanic weight; the second is by a German composer although it has the soothing quality of Dvořák’s folk-like melodies. Therefore, rather than attempt to identify the origin, might it not be more productive to focus on the qualities of the works that can be associated with specific composers, in this case Dvořák and Brahms, both of whom were influenced by similar musical traditions (of the Romantic era and of folk music) that add an attractive flavor to the music? Dvořák (Czech) and Brahms (German) were also friends and knew each other’s work. Might they have been influenced not only by their nations but by each other? With these examples as a focal point, where does the German end and the Czech begin, or has the implication of such a question become, by this time, so inane that we need not ask it again? Now that our discussion has brought us inevitably back to the notion of acculturation and to the significant impact cultures, as well as individuals, have upon one another when they come in contact, we must also ask if it is possible to define, or even to locate, an authentic Czech music in America?

Historical events and the consequential positioning of more dominant and more acquiescent cultures may well have kept Czech artistic traditions, including Czech music, out of the mainstream (or, more accurately, smuggled into histories written by the victors). Long-established approaches to academic subject matter have repeatedly subordinated these contributions to the prevailing German/Austrian culture, thereby strengthening their position as tangential. The information that authors of music history survey textbooks have traditionally included in their discussions of the Baroque period forward continue to favor the German pantheon: Bach, Beethoven, Mozart, Schubert, Brahms, Wagner, and Schoenberg. Granted, the authors of these textbooks are severely confined in terms of how much they can cover in a restricted number of pages and by the decisions tradition dictates must be made in terms of which composers to include and to what degree they will be discussed. As it is, a combination of tradition and the limitations of a one-volume

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textbook invites music educators to continue to teach the primarily German canon and, consequently, to skim over or not cover at all, the rich repertoires from the Czech Lands and other geographic areas, thereby creating audiences with a knowledge and familiarity base slanted to favor certain cultures over others.

Most introductory textbooks, written to acquaint English audiences with the Western classical tradition, cover Czech composers under the rubric of nationalism, with only two or three figures deemed worthy of mention. While Czech classical music is without question a combination of German and Slavic elements, it nevertheless represents a unique and potent influence on Western tradition beyond pleasant folk melodies and turns of phrase, especially in terms of the cultural development of Austria and Germany. Despite this historically substantiated role, when Czech music immigrates to America, particularly instrumental and orchestral music, many of these cultural and historical associations are unknown and the music becomes little more than an exotic branch of German to the uninitiated, with a smattering of Slavic folk features that makes it pleasantly accessible.

Considering how far from the source a familiarity with Czech music seems to have taken all but a few, combined with the acculturative process all societies engage in, is it still possible to locate qualities that are uniquely Czech and that define unambiguously the essence of this region's artistic contributions? Even if we are able to locate that essence or what we think might be unique, we face another potential dilemma. We are encouraged at every turn in today's society to celebrate diversity. In principal, this is an admirable goal, resulting in an effort to acknowledge and appreciate cultural differences, to value individuals and their diverse perspectives, and to inform and enlighten our perceptions of the world through our investigation of what makes us unique. Yet even if we insist that there is some magic formula for Czechness, we must take care not to fall into the persistent trap that leads to attributing a one-size-fits-all analysis to the music of this culture.

At the same time that we are looking for what makes a culture unique, we must also recognize that acculturation is nothing new. Technology has given outside influences greater range, but they have always been there, extending as far as their circumstances would allow. Cultural identities (whether of the Czechs in the United States, of the Czechs in Taiwan, or of the Czechs in the Czech Republic) are, in fact, an accumulation of influences (foreign and domestic) over time. Is it even possible then to salvage a unique Czech identity, a Czech DNA that will always maintain itself whatever the outside influences? Undoubtedly no. Should we try to maintain the notion of a Czech cultural identity that, in actuality, poses the danger of further removing Czech contributions in music from the mainstream? Common sense says we do not want to portray a culture as being on the outside looking in. At the same time, it seems morally right to attempt to maintain a sense of cultural heritage. Is campaigning for the appreciation of diversity the answer then that will allow acceptance of the "other" into the mainstream, with deserving Czech composers enjoying a status equal to that of Bach, Beethoven, Brahms, and Wagner? Would such seeming advances ultimately result in Czech music being regarded not as Czech music but simply as music, thereby dispelling the notion that it is a "national" phenomenon and, therefore, peripheral to the mainstream?

Let us return to our hypothetical man on the street. How would such changes in attitude affect his perceptions? Perhaps the original question could be stated differently, not as what Czech musical works can you name but what classical music do you know? If we are lucky, and we just may be, he will respond "...well, there's this piece that I really like, it has nice tunes, and some exciting places here and there. Sounds a little American, but I don't think it is entirely. As far as classical music goes, it's one work I don't have to change the channel on. And it's by this person, oh, what's his name? Beethoven! No..., starts with a D. Dvorak [mispronounced], that's it."

## **"A Question of Acculturation: What is "Czech Music" in America?"**

### *Response Questions*

Answer the following on a separate piece of lined paper, in full sentences. Pay close attention to the amount of marks allotted to each question.

1. How does the role of "the intellectual" relate to musicians, specifically in the Romantic period? (1 mark)
2. Why is Nettl's approach to world music "limited", as he says? (1 mark)
3. Why would "polluted styles" or fusion music be regarded as "unstable" and therefore not studied? (1 mark)
4. Define 'acculturation'. (1 mark)
5. What is the surprising difference revealed between the so-called "trademark" music of Mexico versus music from the "Orient"? Explain. (2 marks)
6. What does the author say causes significant differences in music between a town in the Czech Republic versus one in Illinois? (1 mark)
7. Give 3 reasons why polka is considered to be "Czech" music. (3 marks)
8. Give 5 points the author uses to describe Dvorak's 'New World Symphony'. (5 marks)
9. "If we didn't know it was the Vlatava and we didn't have Smetana's hints, could it just as easily be the Danube"? Answer yes or no, and explain. (3 marks)
10. What is the juxtaposition between Dvorak's No.2 symphony and Brahms's No.2 Symphony? (2 marks)
11. Define "cultural identities". (1 mark)
12. Why would we in society be "lucky" if the hypothetical "man on the street" responded the way he does at the end of the article? Explain, giving reference to the author's position on the appreciation of diversity. (4 marks)

